

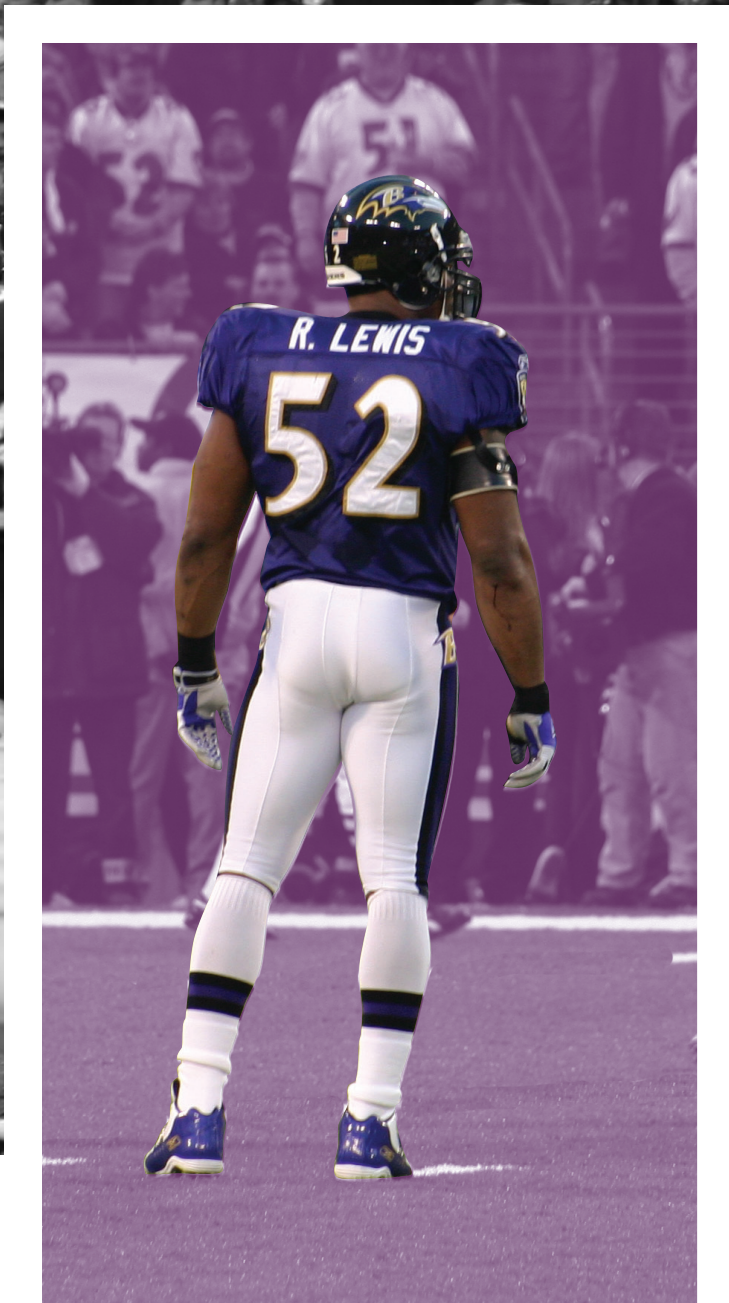
THE



cultivating talent is a relentless game

BY ERIC TEGLER

GO-TO GUY



NFL FOOTBALL HAS BECOME ONE OF THE MAINSTAYS OF AMERICAN LIFE,

yet for players and coaches, life in the NFL is decidedly unstable. No one really knows who's going to be there the following day depending upon injuries and talent. John Feinstein's 2005 best-selling book on a season with the Baltimore Ravens, *Next Man Up*, sums it up well: Twist your knee or miss too many tackles – or even perform too well – and it's next man up.

While the performance and turnover of talent in business isn't highlighted as boldly as in professional sports, it is just as crucial. Your firm's talent is your support, your team, your chief resource. Spotting it, cultivating it and retaining it will be necessary for the life of your business. Demand for talent may have waned of late depending upon whom you ask, but if that's true, it will surely rebound at some point. Ironically, by the time it does, your relationship with it as a business owner or CEO may have fundamentally changed. The go-to guy or gal may indeed be dictating the terms.

Superstars have long dictated terms in sports and in business, but as one local CEO says, "One superstar is not going to bring you a championship. You need a team of stars who can work together to bring you a championship."

ALWAYS RECRUITING

It's a formula sports franchises like the Baltimore Ravens know well. Their scouts are on the lookout for talent nearly all year. They start in earnest in the spring and never rest, even when the season ends.

"Our scouts want to look at the athletic ability of the player," Baltimore Ravens president Dick Cass says, "How big, how fast, how quick, how explosive. But they also want to find out something about the person – intelligence, work ethic, toughness, their ability to deal with adversity."

Ravens scouts are mostly ex-college players, many right out of college themselves. Their first job at Ravens headquarters at Owings Mills is to learn from the older scouts, a process of talent transfer that happens in business all the time. It happens at Arc Aspicio, an Arlington-based management consultancy that specializes in the homeland security field.

"Sometimes an individual comes in and starts off as a generalist but in the course of doing a few projects, realizes that they like doing a certain kind of work," Arc Aspicio's director of talent and operations, Maryanne Waller, affirms. "If there's the business need, our model allows them to learn from a senior individual in that role to become a specialist and build that specialty for our company."

The talent transfer that Ravens scouts enjoy happens for rookie players in the NFL as soon as they arrive at a team's training camp. But they must be recruited first, a process in which the Baltimore football franchise invests considerable effort.

Once a Ravens scout has spent a couple years under the wing of a veteran scout he'll go out on the road and attend spring and summer college football camps at various schools, Dick Cass explains. During the summer and fall, scouts will attend practices if permitted, watching players of interest and identifying others with possibility. They'll go to games and watch hours of game tape. If they're particularly interested in a prospect, they'll talk to his position coach and trainer or conditioning coach to learn more about his work ethic and ability to get along with teammates.

At length, the scout will write a report, which other scouts will read and cross check. After discussion and meetings, the prospect is assigned a grade before a final assessment begins. It's an intense, drawn out process that most CEOs probably don't have quite the time or resources to invest in. Nevertheless, the success of a firm's recruiting ultimately shows up in business as it does on the gridiron.

"We look for leadership at all levels, even with our junior associates," Arc Aspicio CEO Lynn Ann Casey says. Her government clients often ask about the company's talent, she adds.

"In many cases, before the proposal process, we're asked about our talent on two levels," Casey says. "Who are our people, what are their capabilities, and how are they going to help solve the challenges of that particular agency? The second question more generally is, what is our recruiting and training process, and what level of retention [do we have] on our projects."

6

TALENT TIPS FROM THE FIELD

What sports teams can teach business executives about finding and keeping top players

GOOD TALENT IS NEVER CHEAP FOR LONG – a promising rookie won't work for pennies forever

IT'S OK TO PAY A PLAYER MORE THAN HIS COACH – don't promote people to management just because they succeed

ALWAYS BE RECRUITING – your scouts should always have their eyes open for the next go-to guy

TRAIN, EVALUATE, THEN TRAIN SOME MORE – hone your talent's on-field skills

HOLD TALENT ACCOUNTABLE – your return on investment is directly linked to a player's performance in a game

TEACH TALENT HOW TO BE AMBASSADORS IN THE COMMUNITY – enthusiastic players will recruit more top talent



“When people join us, they hit the ground running. I need to know our people can deliver and they can be put under a lot of pressure.”

MARISSA LEVIN



The answers can make or break a proposal, so Arc Aspicio has carefully recruited employees with the right mix of technical and interpersonal skills required to collaborate with federal agency employees.

Dan Simpkins’ recruiting objectives are slightly different, but he is just as careful in his pursuit of talent. Simpkins’ firm, Hillcrest Labs, is a Rockville tech company that has developed innovative devices for interacting with television that replace the traditional remote. Hillcrest is always on the lookout for gifted designers and technicians, but is in the sales and marketing phase of its life cycle and looking for appropriate talent.

“I probably take talent more seriously than many executives,” Simpkins declares. “The typical definition of talent is some kind of innate ability to perform some function. I’m looking for potential employees to not only be skilled in the trade in which I’m going to use them, but to be able to go above and beyond.”

While recruiting the right talent will usually breed success, the pressures of a football season and vagaries of the NFL’s “next man up” syndrome mean that the Ravens often have to reach out for talent that can play immediately, talent you find on the free agent market. It’s a different kind of recruitment, Dick Cass acknowledges.

“It varies dramatically from player to player,” he says. “Some highly priced and highly sought after free agents know they’re going to play. If you’re going to spend a lot of money on a player, you’re doing it because you believe that person’s going to get a lot of playing time.”

Marissa Levin is trying to recruit employees who’ll get a lot of “playing time.” The CEO of Information Experts, a Reston, VA-based communications and strategic consulting firm,

Levin held a job fair in mid December in search of project managers, graphic designers and quality control analysts. One might find entry-level people to fill such positions, but because of its time-critical work with clients, including the FDIC, Information Experts needs accomplished “free agents.”

“We have a pretty decent talent pool to select from right now,” Levin relates. “That said, we run very fast in our company. We’re not a training ground. We just don’t have the luxury of bringing people in with a long on-boarding process. When people join us, they hit the ground running. We don’t hire entry-level people. I need to know our people can deliver and they can be put under a lot of pressure.”

How does Information Experts find such people? It asks its current employees. “I’d say 60 to 70 percent of our newest hires have come from direct employee referrals,” Levin offers. “We depend on that.” Underlining that dependence are financial incentives for employees who refer talent to Information Experts.

Arc Aspicio leverages referrals for recruiting, as well. Often, the referrals come from outside the company, Lynn Ann Casey reports. Teaming partners and clients upon whom the firm has made a positive impression have frequently recommended talent.

Having well-regarded talent on your team is a recruiting tool itself, Dan Simpkins adds. “Talented people tend to attract talented people. [Hillcrest Labs’] reputation has brought people to us,” he says.

The Ravens’ winning reputation and its desirability as an NFL franchise attracts veteran talent, Dick Cass agrees.

“I think when people think about free agents, they think about the highly priced and sought after free agents, but there are many who are just trying to hook up with a team,” he says. “Sometimes we’re recruiting, sometimes the shoe is on the other foot.”

Ultimately, attracting top talent is about compensation. Fail to offer competitive remuneration and you’ll not only see fewer talented recruits, your resident talent may walk out the door in a hurry.



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THE GO-TO GUY

“It’s hard to imagine an industry where individuals are held more accountable than they are in professional football.”

GOOD TALENT ISN'T CHEAP FOR LONG

Bart Scott is a good example of the above sentiment. He wasn't sought after in the NFL draft, but the Ravens took a chance on the Southern Illinois University linebacker, signing him as a rookie free agent in 2002. Solid starts his first season and injuries to superstar linebacker Ray Lewis saw Scott get significant playing time (and more money) in subsequent seasons. Following an appearance at the Pro Bowl and a successful 2008 season, he became an unrestricted free agent and signed for the New York Jets in February 2009 – for \$48 million.

Talent doesn't stay cheap for long, most CEOs agree, despite the stuttering economy. While the conventional wisdom is that now is a good time to get talent inexpensively given the underemployed labor force, Lynn Ann Casey sees a Bart Scott scenario.

“I don't know that talent is very cheap right now,” she says. “One of the things we think about when making an offer is retaining that person. If we don't pay them the right sort of compensation now, they're going to leave in two or three years when the market does change. We need to make sure we're compensating them appropriately so they'll stay when the market gets better.”

Marissa Levin regards human capital as her company's most valuable asset and compensates it accordingly. “It's not cheap, but it's an investment you make,” she says. “I do believe there has to be a proactive approach to building your talent pool, which includes attractively compensating it.”

While agreeing that competitive compensation is important, Dan Simpkins doesn't strictly follow the “show me the money” approach to acquiring and retaining talent.

“In boom times, somebody comes in once, you interview them and grab them before someone else does,” he acknowledges. But Simpkins adds that unless an individual is a superstar, managers are currently less fearful about passing on a potential hire. The situation reminds him of his own days as a hiring manager in the 1980s when Hewlett Packard was a model for recruiting.



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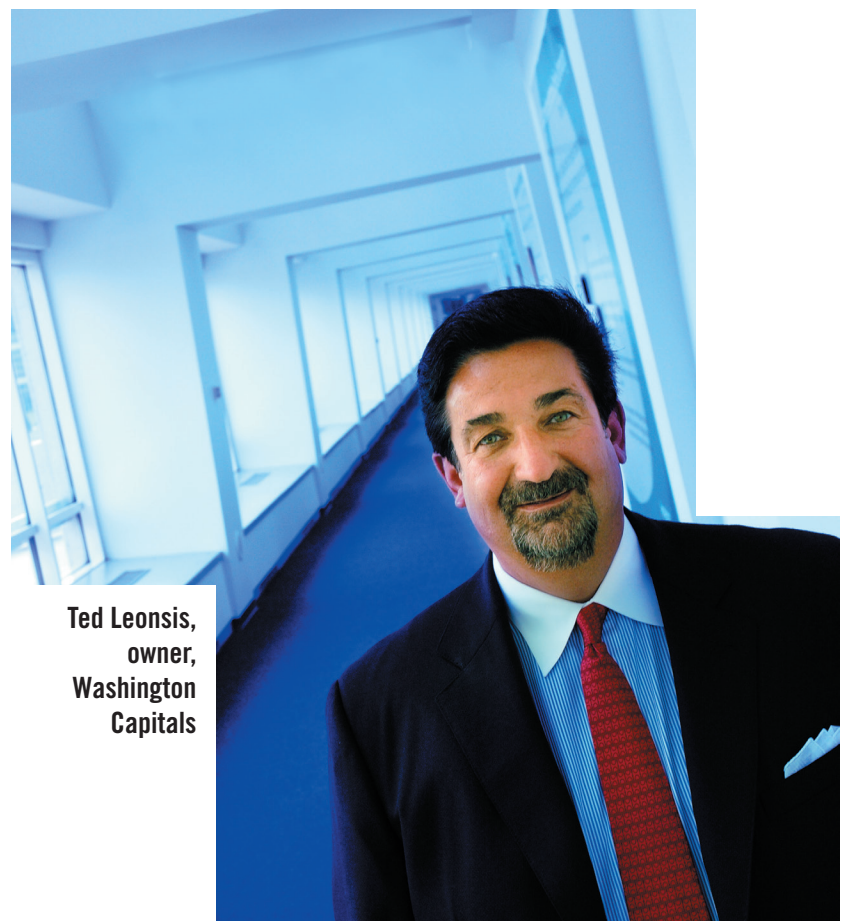
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Ted Leonsis,
 owner,
 Washington
 Capitals

Bryan Burris

C-LEVEL SUBS

We're all familiar with traditional temp agencies like Manpower. Need an administrative assistant? Just ring 'em up. But you may not know that a new class of temp talent is now available: the managerial elite.

Boston's Epoch Partners is one of a handful of firms around the country that can offer you an experienced interim CEO. Epoch was founded in 2007 by former Fidelity executive Linda Stewart, who perceived a "huge impending labor gap" with the demographic shift that will soon see 77 million people retire with but 40 million left behind in the workforce. Stewart also noticed that her executive Boomer friends were expressing a desire not to work full time anymore.

"I understood that businesses were going to fundamentally have to change the way they use and employ talent in order to manage their fixed costs," she says.

The practice of discreetly hiring temporary C-level talent has been in vogue in Europe for some years, and its time has come here, Stewart maintains. American companies are quietly recognizing that temporary executive talent represents a variable cost to the firm, provides access to deep expertise without lengthy recruiting, incurs zero benefits or severance costs, and is goal oriented with no political agenda.

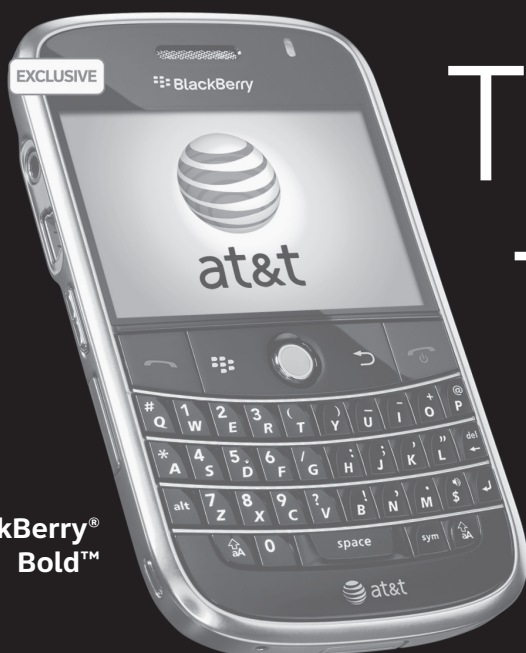
"The P&Gs, the Colgate-Palmolives, General Motors, American Airlines — a lot of these big organizations are collapsing under their own weight because they maintain such a high fixed cost infrastructure," Stewart says, "and 85 to 90 percent of that is usually in talent. Some of the best talent out there no longer wants to be employed. It's more efficient for companies to engage smart people for a limited time and specific projects. It can accelerate critical initiatives or solve specific business problems."

Epoch has a portfolio of about 2,500 individuals and has been contacted by 10 times that number, according to its CEO. Initially offering talent to financial services companies, Epoch has diversified into the biotech, life sciences, healthcare and private equity sectors. Stewart says she's spoken with confirmed promote-from-within proponents like former GE CEO Jack Welch, who said he'd have embraced executive temps because he wanted to put young company talent in new positions while mitigating risk by partnering them with someone who'd done it before. Stewart calls that "competency transfer."

But more significant is the talent shift she calls "engagement."

"In the history of our country, the power has been with the employer for the most part," she says. "As this demographic shift hits, a fundamental power shift away from the employer to the employee will [occur]. It used to be that in exchange for loyalty you got security. That's no longer the contract between employer and employee. In the future, people are going to say, 'Here are the terms on which I will engage with your company.' Companies will be forced to comply because the best talent out there will be working this way."

Peter Drucker said that developed countries would evolve from a "society of organizations" to a "society of networks." According to a recent *Economist* magazine article, half of America's temps are now professionals and more than a quarter of American workers now classify themselves as "free agents." If that trend holds, your relationship to talent, C-level or otherwise, may be less in your control than ever.



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"We look for leadership at all levels, even with our junior associates."

LYNN ANN CASEY



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"Hewlett Packard had incredibly tough recruiting standards," he recalls. "The difficulty of getting a job at HP was legendary. An HP manager was asked, 'Don't you worry that you're missing out on opportunities with the people you're letting go?' The manager said, 'Yes, but I never got a bad one.' I think we've returned to those times where we may let talent go that I might have taken a flyer on before. If you stick to your standards, it's unlikely that you'll bring in a person that doesn't develop as the talent you want."

Ted Leonsis knows a thing or two about the value of talent. He's been a tech entrepreneur and sports franchise owner for decades. A cofounder of AOL, its CEO, and a major factor in its spectacular growth, he stepped down from the now spun-off, newly public ex-Time Warner subsidiary in 2006. He remains active in the tech space as the chairman of Revolution Money, a new Web 2.0 payment platform and credit-card service. He pairs that with partial ownership of the Washington Wizards NBA team and full ownership of the Washington Capitals NHL franchise.

The Caps were fairing well midway through December 2009 (20-7-6) but when I spoke with Leonsis for the debut issue of *Washington SmartCEO* back in May 2005 things weren't looking so bright. In fact, there had been no 2004/2005 hockey season. NHL owners had locked out their players and the dispute was about money. Player salaries had gone up astronomically during the previous decade, driven in part by a collective bargaining agreement that superheated a talent market, fanned by superstar signings by Leonsis and other owners.

Though locking out his talent cost the Washington Capitals owner millions over an unprecedented "lost" season, Leonsis insisted that under the old collective bargaining (or collective talent) agreement, winning required buying talent at any cost – an untenable business model.

"In sports, you have a union," Leonsis explained at the time. "At AOL we don't. We lived with that [collective bargaining] agreement for 10 years. It proved to be a very good agreement for the players and a less positive agreement for the owners. We said we must negotiate a new contract and we couldn't get to a new deal, so we said we can't play... The contract ended and we didn't want to play under those old rules. We're trying to get a new agreement that fundamentally does what the deals do in the NFL and NBA."

The NFL and NBA have salary caps, which is what the NHL got after the owners and players settled in mid-2005. The lesson is that while good talent is never cheap for long, it can also price itself too highly for employers' tastes. The battle between labor and capital is alive and well in the 21st century.

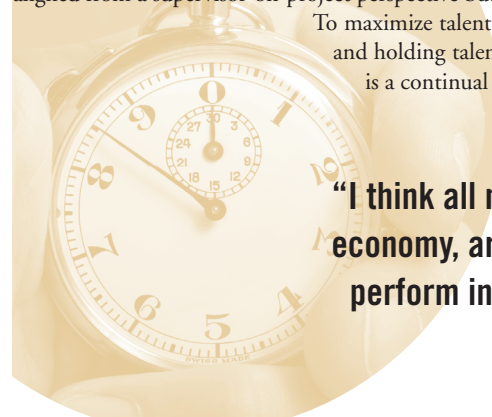
Of course, the majority of American workers are not unionized. It's a fact that can lead to distortions of the most common remuneration structures. In most hierarchical business organizations, tenured managers make more than their subordinates. But, is it OK to pay a talented individual more than his or her boss?

In football it seems to be. While there are certain skill positions like quarterback (the quintessential "field boss") that tend to pay more than others, "it's not uncommon at all to have a defensive or offensive lineman making more than the quarterback," Dick Cass concedes. "That depends a bit on what stage of career the lineman is in versus the quarterback, but outstanding players simply make more."

Maryanne Waller acknowledges that Arc Aspicio is looking at the idea that an individual needn't be promoted simply because they succeed. Paying that individual more than his or her superior could make sense.

"We're not level-restricted in rewarding our people," she says. "We are hierarchically aligned from a supervisor-on-project perspective but we focus on talent."

To maximize talent, that focus must be relentless. Assessing and holding talent accountable to clear and defined goals is a continual process.



"I think all managers, especially in this economy, are looking for their talent to perform in ways they haven't before."

EVALUATE, TRAIN, EVALUATE

Dick Cass,
president,
Baltimore
Ravens



Bryan Burris

“The evaluation process never stops,” Dick Cass explains. “You bring 80 players to camp in the summer. Only 53 make the active roster and eight are signed to the practice squad. Some players are going to get cut and some players are going to make it. During the season, some player might get hurt and you have to replace him, or someone may not be playing particularly well and you decide to sign a free agent. There’s constant evaluation going on every week. Every practice is filmed, every game is filmed.”

Unless they pass the field of view of a security camera, business talent isn’t generally filmed. But evaluating and training talent should be a cycle that never ceases. Investing the effort matters, Dan Simpkins stresses.

“We go to a lot of effort to review our talent,” he says. “We have a formal review process. I do written assessments of my people that are both prosaic and quantitative. I use the quantitative data to fold back into their compensation adjustments. There’s a clear accountability built into our system”

Arc Aspicio employees mutually evaluate talent in a formal process, its director of talent explains.

“Every individual has a career counselor outside their reporting chain,” Maryanne Waller says. “That person helps the individual develop their performance plan and is objective about their role. The individual gets multiple perspectives on their career and different input.”

Clarity is important. Evaluations that are set against well communicated, definable goals allow employers to maximize talent and attract people who can work to clearly stated thresholds. Information Experts CEO Marissa Levin sets clear goals for her staff, explaining that in large measure they must be “self starters.”

“We find that people who come from large organizations often have a hard time coming into an entrepreneurial environment,” she says. “If they come from a large

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"I probably take talent more seriously than many executives."

DAN SIMPKINS



company and expect a big proposal shop to support them when they make a pitch or they think they won't have to chip in on proposal development, they won't fit with [us]."

Standardized but flexible training is crucial to the Ravens' performance on the field, Dick Cass asserts. When the team brings in a rookie or a veteran free agent, it makes a training investment in the individual and expects a return on that investment.

"It's coaching, it's weight training," he says. "It's teaching people how to watch film, teaching good study habits and developing consistent work habits."

Getting a return on that investment is directly linked to a player's effort on the practice field or in a game, where accountability and performance are obvious. "It's hard to imagine an industry or a business where individuals are held more accountable than they are in professional football," Cass observes. "In other sports, there are guaranteed contracts, but generally in pro football, there are no guaranteed contracts."

The Ravens kicker situation during the 2009 season proved the culture of accountability in football. Two kickers came and went in short order when they didn't perform. The culture exists in hockey, too. Before the player lockout in the fall of 2004, Ted Leonsis undertook a dramatic reorganization at the Capitals, dropping pricey veteran talent like Peter Bondra and Sergei Gonchar for younger (and cheaper) players.

"The rationalist in me said I'm going to be getting older, less productive and we're going to be losing more money," he said at the time. "The lockout is coming. I've got to make some changes. I think what we did last year was really gutsy. We were criticized for it, but I didn't know how to catch these young teams with a veteran team that was getting older. ... We lost the season and would've been even older. We should be able to improve, but the jury's out. Did we do the right thing?"

The Capitals finished last in their division the following two seasons but clinched third place overall in 2007-08. Leonsis was brutal with his talent and it paid off, though it took three years.

While performance may or may not be as starkly measurable in a conventional business enterprise, holding talent accountable is just as important. Dan Simpkins hasn't turned talent over at Hillcrest Labs the way Leonsis cleared the ice at the Capitals. In fact, he says 45 percent of his staff has been with Hillcrest four years or more.

Holding talent accountable was a lesson he learned as a teenager, however. During high school, Simpkins worked as a manager in his father's business and had hired an employee who wasn't performing.

"One day at the dinner table, I told my dad that this manager wasn't working out," Simpkins recalls. "I said, 'Dad, what do you want to do about it?' He turned to me and said, 'What do I want to do about it? What are you going to do about it? You hired the person. You take care of it.' So, as a 17 year old, I had to let this person go. I learned the value of hiring good talent, developing it, helping it help me and holding it accountable by giving it a clear review and coupling compensation to that review as closely as possible."



"Talented people tend to attract talented people."

CROSS FUNCTIONAL AMBASSADORS

"I think all managers, especially in this economy, are looking for their talent to perform in ways they haven't before," Simpkins says.

If you have talented people, you've likely figured that now may be the time to utilize them in ways you haven't previously considered. Such talent may be referred to as cross functional in a technical sense. In plain speak, it means people stretch their talents to take on responsibilities formerly outside their remit. That's exactly what Marissa Levin is asking of her employees.

"We might hire someone as an instructional designer," she says, "but when we hire that person, we ask, 'Do you have project management experience? Is that something you'd be interested in?' What we find from a project management perspective is that it's quite helpful if [the individual] actually has experience in the areas in which we actually provide our services, and we don't pigeon-hole at Information Experts."

While "cross-functionality" may be synonymous with more work for the same pay, in many cases it can actually stimulate employees and rekindle their interest in a firm. Formally recognizing the need to cross competencies is often forgotten at small firms where "all hands" contribute based on implied (and obvious) need. Arc Aspicio, which stresses flexibility in its staff, has articulated the idea of performing different career tasks.

"Because we've grown so much this year, we've introduced a career model for our employees," Marianne Waller explains. "It's a flexible model that allows people the opportunity to change their direction and have different careers at Arc Aspicio."

"The way to show people you value them is to trust them with new responsibilities and to be an emissary for the company," Dan Simpkins adds.

Engaged, enthusiastic employees tend to tell others about their jobs and become ambassadors for a firm. That ambassadorial role is a core value at Arc Aspicio, which calls it "inter-related networking." It builds relationships with clients and others outside the firm as well as among employees within the firm, CEO Lynn Ann Casey contends.

"We actually reward people in their bonus package for their ability to be ambassadors and stewards for the firm," she says.

Talented stewards inevitably generate interest from the competition, but you can't lock down your people. The Ravens know this as well as anyone. Like all NFL teams, they lose talent all the time.

"You can't keep everybody," Dick Cass sighs. "I think our personnel department led by Ozzie Newsome has selected a lot of outstanding players, and our coaches have done a great job in developing them. So they become very good and therefore, they become very valuable as free agents. We've been unable to re-sign some very valuable players who we've developed here, and they've gone on to play for other teams and make a lot of money. But, that's what happens."

Players have left Hillcrest Labs, too. But Dan Simpkins feels that if you regularly show your employees that the things they're working on are having a positive impact on the firm's success, they'll think less about leaving.

"No one wants to work on a failure," he quips. "The only way to prevent the talent from leaving is to stimulate them, to give them a flexible, creative and engaging work environment."

It's a relentless process that ought to be treated like game-day. When a talent at your company goes down or departs, the next go-to guy better be ready to start. **CEO**

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